

2d Place 2004 MacArthur Writing Award Winner

From One to Three Sixty Assessing Leaders

Major Craig Whiteside, U.S. Army

The efficiency report is the most disturbing administrative farce in the Army. It is the measure of "following" and not leading. Its weight in "tickets of success" allows officers of incompetence in leadership to advance.

—anonymous Army captain, U.S. Army War College Study on Military Professionalism, 1970

The General Officers in the U.S. Army would gain much from having instruction and developing an understanding on "selfless service" versus "selfish service." Most are preoccupied with their careers. Unfortunately, this is the type of officer the system moves along.

—anonymous Army major, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Survey, 2000

THE U.S. ARMY celebrated the arrival of the 21st century with a much-needed Transformation effort that applies to everything from force structure to logistics. Leader education schools are changing to reflect new demands on junior and midlevel leaders in response to the changing operational environment. Yet a common theme, as seen in the two quotes given, reveals what the Army as an institution has yet to address—how subordinates or peers evaluate their leaders. A 360-degree leader-evaluation tool would provide a substantial improvement for the Future Force in its mission to produce the best leaders to face current and future challenges.

A 360-degree evaluation system elicits and provides feedback about leaders—supervisors, peers, or subordinates. With the supervisor's comments being an exception, feedback is anonymous to eliminate possible retribution. The rater's comments are part of developmental counseling, which includes a detailed account of another's strengths and weaknesses and perceived methods for possible improvement. A 360-degree system would allow subjects to

review others' perceptions of their leadership abilities and characteristics and could spur self-reflection when their self-perception differs from others'.

Does the Army really need a 360-degree evaluation system? The Army recently revamped the Officer Evaluation System with an emphasis on more senior-to-subordinate counseling and Officer Evaluation Report (OER) counseling at the end of the rating period. This has improved the dialogue from seniors to subordinates, especially since the new OER has blocks in which to report mandatory counseling meetings. In addition to counseling, the Army's leader-development program is an effective process that provides periodic feedback for subordinates to improve over time.¹ Yet all these programs are senior-to-subordinate-intensive. None give raters a feel for what subordinates or peers think about the leader, if that is indeed important.

The first chapter of Field Manual (FM) 22-100, *Army Leadership*, quoting Confederate Colonel Albert G. Jenkins, alludes to the subordinate's role in leadership and command: "To our subordinates we owe everything we are or hope to be. For it is our subordinates, not our superiors, who raise us to the dizzyest of professional heights, and it is our subordinates who can and will, if we deserve it, bury us in the deepest mire of disgrace. When the chips are down and our subordinates have accepted us as their leader, we don't need any superior to tell us; we see it in their eyes and in their faces in the barracks, on the field, and on the battle line. And on that final day when we must be ruthlessly demanding, cruel and heartless, they will rise as one to do our bidding, knowing full well that it may be their last act in this life."²

I believe subordinates do have a vote, especially on the battlefield. But do they have anything worthwhile to contribute to the leadership development of their leaders? In the past 30 years, two Army sur-



US Military Academy

An engineering instructor working with cadets at the U.S. Military Academy. Twice a semester, cadets submit reports on supervisors, selected peers, and all subordinates for review by company tactical officers responsible for cadet development.

veys have touched on subordinates' perceptions of leaders, with some disturbing conclusions.

In 1970, the Army fought one war in Vietnam while also preparing for a possible war with the Soviet Union. Chief of Staff of the Army General William C. Westmoreland tasked the U.S. Army War College (AWC) to conduct a study of Army professionalism. Many of the comments the report captured reflected a decline in standards of ethics and leadership that threatened Army professionalism. The report made dozens of recommendations to Army leaders to help address junior officers' concerns. One recommendation was to implement "as a supplementary input to officer efficiency files, the results of peer ratings which would be compiled from periodic solicitations . . . of comments by selected officers on those contemporaries with whom they have served."³ Another recommendation was to have "students at the [U.S. Army Command and General Staff College] and [the U.S. Army War College] submit confidential comments on prospective selectees to brigadier general [to] the president of the board to use as he [saw] fit."⁴ The study found one source of problems to be the promotion of officers whose superiors viewed them much more positively than did their subordinates.

In the spring of 2000, Chief of Staff of the Army General Eric K. Shinseki initiated a review of Army leadership as part of the Transformation effort. Shinseki's Army Training and Leader Development Panel study revealed some of the same shortcomings in the area of "senior-subordinate confidence and contact" and the lack of a functional leader-

development program as found in the earlier AWC study.⁵ Little progress had been made in standardizing a leader-development process outside of commissioning sources or education systems.

In contrast, since 1970, the proliferation of the 360-degree evaluation tool in the private sector has been spectacular. Many leading Fortune 500 companies use some form of 360-degree feedback in their sophisticated leader-development and fast-track programs. In a business environment where organizations fight to keep highly trained and motivated workers from moving to rival companies, CEOs have a vested interest in knowing what subordinates feel about midlevel managers and which ones are accomplishing organizational goals and objectives while maintaining a productive work environment. Consulting organizations such as the Center for Creative Leadership offer clients many versions of 360-degree systems.⁶

Many Army schools that use the 360-degree assessment system have a high reputation for leader development. The U.S. Army Ranger School has long used a combination of evaluated patrols by lane walkers and peer reports to determine whether a student should continue to the next phase of the course. Infantry School leaders apparently believe peer rankings and comments are important in a course that demands close teamwork and a combination of leadership and service to other leaders.

Another leadership institution, the U.S. Military Academy (USMA), uses a 360-degree assessment process as an integral part of the leader development of cadets each year. Twice a semester,

cadets submit reports on supervisors, selected peers, and all subordinates on an electronic form synthesized and data-organized for review by company tactical officers (commissioned officers responsible for cadet development in a cadet company). The company tactical officers incorporate feedback into biannual counseling for cadets. Most officers deduce trends from the comments and relay this information to the cadets. Other cadets might receive copies of anonymous raw comments. The USMA has used this 360-degree assessment since the late 1980s when leaders first incorporated the Cadet Leader Development System. How well does such a system work?

From 2000 to 2003, while I was a company tactical officer, I doubted the feasibility of a 360-degree assessment within a large organization and did not use the 360-degree assessments much. Many of the computer-generated evaluations were obviously perfunctory entries, involving little to no effort. The evaluations, which were ungraded, were not a top priority for the cadets, and they provided little useful information. Eventually, however, I realized what a good tool evaluations could be if used correctly. One method was to include all leader evaluations signed by their subordinates in cadet counseling packets, which made the evaluations items to be inspected.

Another method was to use the feedback during cadets' biannual professional counseling sessions, which focused on overall cadet development; future plans and goals; branch and post selections; future leadership positions; and so on. At the end of the sessions, I gave each cadet a specially selected (and anonymous) cross-section of comments about themselves and asked them what they thought. I was not sure this tactic was helpful until I dismissed one cadet from a lengthy counseling session during which I forgot to include subordinate and peer comments. The cadet returned later and asked for this feedback, having heard from others about it. This comment spoke volumes to me about cadets' desires to find out what their strengths and weaknesses were and what others felt about them. Many were surprised by what they learned, especially the cocky ones who thought they were "already there"—finished with leader development and ready to be lieutenants.

Those not in favor of 360-degree feedback worry that people can abuse these evaluations to target leaders who are actually doing the right things. A leader who is attuned to the unit's environment can identify this threat easily. In one case, a sophomore wrote sarcastic, unprofessional comments about the company first sergeant, such as, "She motivates me . . . to want to punch her in the face." Fortunately,

these subordinate evaluations are not anonymous to the "big boss," and I knew who had submitted the comments. I shared the feedback with the first sergeant (without revealing the subordinate's identity) to see what her reaction would be. She responded quite well, considering. Later, I called in the cadet and his squad leader. I read several of his submissions and asked what he was trying to prove. He was ashamed and eventually apologized face-to-face to everyone he had maligned. I wondered whether he apologized because he thought I would reveal his identity to others, or because he felt it was the right thing to do. But the incident illustrates that subordinates cannot subvert the evaluation process if it is conducted properly.

I believe the best benefit of a 360-degree system is that it gives supervisors a different perspective about those with whom they work. I used the 360-degree system to examine discrepancies between what I thought of a subordinate and what everyone else did. It is easy to become too confident in one's judgment or the belief that one cannot be fooled. Someone else might view the workhorse you rely on and admire greatly in a much different way than you do, especially subordinates who might be doing the work but not getting the credit. I suspect this is what is at the root of most problems with the Army's promotion system—a single officer or non-commissioned officer's perspective does not really tell the whole story. A proper balance between being highly thought of by superiors and having the respect and (sometimes grudging) admiration of subordinates and peers is desirable.

The new force-stabilization policies, which will keep soldiers and young officers in the same units for many years, provide great opportunities for leaders to get to know subordinates and to conduct effective, long-term leader-development practices. To do this, the Army needs more than one perspective—and a 360-degree evaluation system. **MR**

NOTES

1. U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 22-100, *Army Leadership* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, August 1999).
2. COL Albert G. Jenkins, Confederate States of America, quoted in *Ibid.*, 1-15.
3. U.S. Army War College (AWC), *Study on Military Professionalism* (Carlisle, PA: AWC, 1970), vii.
4. *Ibid.*
5. William M. Steele and Robert P. Walters, Jr., "Training and Developing Army Leaders," *Military Review* (July-August 2001): 6.
6. For information about the Center for Creative Leadership, see on-line at <www.ccl.org/CCLCommerce/index.aspx>, accessed 29 June 2004.

Major Craig A. Whiteside, U.S. Army, is G3, Operations, at U.S. Army, Alaska. He received a B.S. from the U.S. Military Academy (USMA), an M.A. from Long Island University, and he is a graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC). He has served in various positions in the 24th Infantry Division, the 82d Airborne Division, and the USMA. He is the 2004 second-place winner of the CGSC MacArthur Writing Award.